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ABSTRACT

Continued, substantial migration of rural students to urban areas for work or further education can be expected, and preparing students for the move from rural to metropolitan areas is an important responsibility for educators. The differences between rural and metropolitan areas are significant, and appropriate preparatory activities in high school can ease the transition. Personal characteristics and values play a big part in a person's ability to adjust to a dramatically different environment. Inventories of personality traits, values, lifestyle, and family orientation can be developed individually, in classroom groups and in discussion with family and friends. Activities to increase assertiveness and to adopt language habits and personal mannerisms appropriate to the city are important in the preparation process. Assessment of skills, abilities, interests, and previous work experience--as well as completing application forms, writing letters of interest and resumes, and learning about appropriate dress and grooming--will greatly improve the probability of finding a job well suited to the individual. Preparation for adjusting to an urban lifestyle, urban higher education, and realistic budgeting are also important. Rural entrepreneurship may be an option if a move to the city is not desired. (JMM)

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ERIC DIGEST

RURAL EDUCATION

EDO-RC-88-08

PREPARING RURAL STUDENTS FOR AN URBAN ENVIRONMENT

Introduction

The transition from youth to adulthood is difficult for many, traumatic for some. The stress experienced during the rites of passage can be severely exacerbated for persons who must simultaneously make the transition from a rural to urban environment. Although education is often viewed as preparation for adulthood, education in a rural setting often neglects adequate preparation for those who, by choice or necessity, will move to a metropolitan area for work or for further education.

The number of rural tudents wishing to relocate in urban areas is considerable. In a study of high school seniors in rural communities of Utah, Seyfrit (1986) found that nearly 80 percent planned to migrate soon after graduation, regardless of the availability of jobs in the rural area. From her own research and review of related studies, Seyfrit concludes that "youth may be so prone to migrate after high school graduation that economic opportunities have little to do with their migration decision." Preparing students for that move thus becomes an important responsibility for educators.

Much of this digest is based on Preparing Rural Youth for an Urban Environment: A Handbook for Educators, by Vaughn and Vaughn, a valuable resource for preparing rural students for a move to work and learn in an urban setting. The Handbook touches briefly upon and suggests appropriate learning activities for almost every aspect of preparing for and adjusting to a dramatic change in environment and lifestyle. Many of the learning activities are appropriate for assisting students in the transition from youth to adulthood, regardless of location. Thus, the learning activities are suitable for almost all high school students. The activities can be used in a separate course, integrated into existing courses, or applied in counseling.

Success Depends on Personal Characteristics and Values

The ability of a person to adjust to a dramatically different environment depends to a large degree on personal characteristics and values. Inventories of personality traits, values, lifestyle, and family orientation can be developed individually, in classroom groups, and in discussion with family and friends. The manner and extent to which these characteristics, values, and patterns are embedded in the rural environment and the degree to which they may be disrupted by moving to a metropolitan area--by, for example, being ruled more by the clock than the sun--are important considerations in preparing rural youth for transition to an urban environment.

Life in a rural climate is often characterized as relaxed, friendly, and warm. The urban atmosphere is often described as hurried, harried, and cold. These characteristics are frequently reflected in different language patterns and personal mannerisms which can instantly classify a person as an "outsider" and thus make adjustment a difficult task. Activities to increase assertiveness and to adopt language habits and personal mannerisms appropriate to the city are important in the preparation process. Making decisions in a familiar, supportive environment is one thing; similar decisions in an unfamiliar situation without a support group can be devastating. Learning activities to increase students' feeling of control over their lives will aid in preparing for transition.

Getting and Keeping a Job

Economic conditions frequently force young people to move from rural to urban areas for employment. A high priority task, on arrival, is

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getting a job. Appropriate preparation before the move will greatly improve the probability of both finding a job and finding one well suited to the individual. Preparation includes assessment of abilities, skills, interests, attributes, and previous work experience. Preparation includes practice in completing application forms, preparing letters of interest and resumes, and learning about appropriate dress and grooming. Preparation may include mock videotaped interviews, perhaps with the personnel officer from a city business, with critique by fellow classmembers. Preparation also includes study of job availability in the target city and analyses of how various jobs match individual skills and interests.

Numerous resources are available for developing job-hunting skills: city newspapers, telephone directories, and publications from the Chamber of Commerce and the Employment Security Commission. Family members and friends who reside in the city can be tapped for employment information. Small businesses tend to use informal means of filling positions; personal contacts are thus an important means of finding employment. Building networking skills through family and friends can be vital to job-hunting.

Preparation for keeping a job is as important as preparation for getting a job. Expectations--both employers' and employees'--can be discussed. Asking questions, learning about getting along with supervisors and coworkers, and assessing others' attitudes are important exercises in preparation for keeping a job. Timeliness, a day's work for a day's pay, and remaining within the assigned area of responsibility (at least initially) are important in keeping a job.

Getting along is important at first; in time, getting ahead--the promotion--becomes important. Learning related tasks, learning about the company's organization and procedures, and taking related courses at the local post-secondary school are helpful in getting promoted.

Adjusting to an Urban Lifestyle

The workplace is only one part of life in the city. Home life and leisure activities are important aspects of urban living. Preparation in these areas is an appropriate high school activity.

Finding an appropriate place to live is almost as important as finding a job. Ideally, the place is convenient to work, shopping, and entertainment, served by good transportation, and affordable. A map of the city, telephone books, and classified ads from the city's newspapers are excellent resources in planning a search for the right housing.

Planning for appropriate leisure activities before the move can be rewarding. Chamber of Commerce brochures and the city map and telephone book are excellent resources for planning affordable leisure activities. Urban areas offer a large variety of activities and there are clubs and organizations associated with almost every activity from acting and bicycling to rock-hounding and skiing. Some companies sponsor clubs and sports teams.

Despite the best plans, there are those who will find themselves in trouble. Contingency planning is appropriate before the move away from home. Knowing the kinds of service agencies available in time of trouble or crisis and how to contact them can be a valuable preparatory activity. Services can be located through newspapers and telephone books and include agencies for abuse, rape and suicide hotlines, pregnancy and birth control, family counseling, legal aid, medical referrals, low or no-cost household items, child care, and police assistance.

Adjusting to Urban Higher Education

In his review of the literature, Brown (1985) cites a number of studies that indicate that rural students in higher education have a higher attrition rate then their urban counterparts. This difference may not be attributable to lower academic achievement. Some studies find that rural students do as well as their urban counter-parts; others indicate that rural students do less well. Lower achievement--when it occurs--may be due, in part, says Brown, to limited access to appropriate course offerings in high school and lack of social and interpersonal interactions. The social system--low economic status, low family expectations, and a perception of limited options--also contributes to the rural dropout rate.

In one examination of rural Kansas high school students who attended college, Downey (1980) found that rural youth have limited occupational role models, have limited views of occupational opportunities, and tend to select from familiar areas.

In a study of freshmen attending the

University of Colorado, Aylesworth and Bloom (1976) found that "the rural freshman going away to college is not distinguishable intellectually from the urban freshman" and received equivalent college grades. Rural students, nevertheless, had a lower survival rate. Factors such as rural students' low socioeconomic origins, greater likelihood of carrying a full-time work load with classes, and larger difficulty in procuring financial aid and work study assignments all increased the possibility of attrition. Not surprisingly, rural students mentioned problems which reflected high levels of stress and alienation--problems of dealing with campus size and impersonality, developing good study habits, and finding other students who were culturally similar and/or friendly.

The recommendations of Brown and of Aylesworth and Bloom suggest that there are high school learning activities that can help students cope with the stress of leaving home and attending college. Many of these activities are the same as those designed to assist rural students migrating to urban areas for employment.

Realistic Budgeting

It is the experience of the author of this digest that many persons moving from a rural to an urban environment have little concept of the associated costs and may therefore be in severe financial difficulties within a short time of arrival. A realistic budget is an important aspect of adjusting to an urban lifestyle. The cost of living--housing, food, clothing, entertainment, transportation, utilities, taxes, insurance--is often significantly higher in urban than in rural areas. And net income may be less than expected.

An excellent high school preparatory activity is to develop a budget of current income and expenditures which is then extended to an urban setting, using estimates of income and expenditures. The urban budget will generally include items that are not included in the current budget of a high school student.

In developing the urban budget, realistic anticipated wages must be used and gross wages must be reduced by payroll deductions: federal, state, and local withholding taxes, social security, union dues, and employee contributions to retirement and insurance plans. Take-home pay may be as much as 30 percent less than gross earnings. Employer-provided benefits may be limited. If health insurance, for example, is not provided, the cost of health insurance or medical expenses must be budgeted and paid out of take-home pay. Projected revenue must consider such factors as whether the anticipated job is full- or part-time, seasonal, or cyclical. Some jobs pay well on an hourly basis, but employment may not be full-time, year-round.

Typical wage rates may be obtained from classified ads in the city's newspapers, from the Employment Security Commission, and from the catalogs of vocational programs offered at vocational schools and community colleges. Costs of housing, food, clothing, and entertainment may be obtained from newspapers. Utility companies can provide data on utility costs. Other expenses, such as medical, may have to be estimated.

In sticking to a budget, it is useful to keep track of all expenditures--every last penny. Variance between expenditures and the budget should result in adjustments to the budget or the expenditure pattern. High expenditures should be examined closely. The cost of eating lunch out compared to brown bagging, for example, can be substantial.

An excellent personal money management workbook, Common Cent$, has been developed by Lawrence (1984). Included are monthly budget and expenditure worksheets, installment payment records, credit card purchase records, monthly expense records, a year-end summary, and a net worth statement.

Choosing to Be a Rural Entrepreneur

If jobs are scarce in the rural community but a move to the city is not desired, entrepreneurship may provide an alternative. The entrepreneur, of course, must be skilled in the goods or services to be provided. In addition, the entrepreneur must be skilled in basic accounting, financial records and reports, marketing, advertising, pricing, hiring and personnel management, payroll and payroll taxes, and the variety of reports that must be made to federal, state, and local governments. Certificates or licenses may be required. Sanitation inspections may be imposed. Safety and health requirements are often mandated. Capital may be needed to get the business under way. Personal savings, family, and friends may provide capital,

but bankers are often unwilling to lend money to the inexperienced entrepreneur. A business plan is essential. The entrepreneur who is without a plan or who fails to follow and update the plan as necessary is likely doomed to an early failure.

A guiding principle, particularly for the young, inexperienced entrepreneur, is start small. It is often helpful to have another job as a source of income while the business is getting on its feet. The Teenage Entrepreneur's Guide; 50 Money-Making Business Ideas by Riehm is particularly helpful. The student who plans on going into business should take advantage of every opportunity to learn, plan, and gain the requisite skills while still in high school.

Summary

High school commencement is a time of significant change: deliverance from the known, predictable world of school to the uncertainties of the "real world," emergence from youth to adulthood, and, for many students in rural communities, a transition to urban environments. The differences between rural and metropolitan areas are significant; substantial accommodations are necessary to adjust to cosmopolitan surroundings. Appropriate preparatory activities in high school can ease the transition. Skills with which to cope with and adjust to urban procedures and mores as well as knowledge about metropolitan opportunities and obstacles can be learned through the high school curriculum.

Many of the skills needed for a satisfactory transition to urban living are useful for successful transition from youth to adulthood. Learning activities for one are often appropriate to the other--and are therefore appropriate to high school students whether or not a move to the city is contemplated. Continued, substantial migration of youth, however, can be expected. Whether the moves are for economic reasons or for postsecondary education, rural high schools will serve students well with learning activities that prepare them for the move.

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By

Doug Swift

March 1988

ERIC CLEARINGHOUSE ON RURAL EDUCATION and SMALL SCHOOLS

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Introduction

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